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**HEADLINE:** KENYA: GOV'T SHUTS DOWN FIVE ISLAMIC RELIEF AGENCIES

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**BODY:**

Kenya's decision to ban five Islamic relief agencies for allegedly "supporting" terrorism has alarmed the East African country's NGO community.

"It is discouraging and threatening for many of us who are honestly trying to improve the living standards of the poor," said Alice Muita of the Nairobi-based Horn of Africa Relief Agency (HARA).

HARA operates in neighboring Somalia and Sudan with the majority Muslim populations. Muita fears that HARA may become the Kenyan government's next victim.

The five organizations were de-registered on Sept. 8 by the NGO coordinating board, a government body which oversees aid groups.

According to the NGO coordinating board's director, John Etemesi, the organizations "had been found to be working against the interests of Kenyans in terms of security".

The offices of one of them, Mercy Relief International, were raided by a team of Kenyan police and U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) agents a few days after the Aug. 7 bombing of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

The other four -- the Al-Haramain Foundation, Help African People, the Islamic Relief Organization and Ibrahim Bin Abdul Aziz Al Ibrahim Foundation -- have not been raided by the law enforcement officers.

More than 250 people were killed and 5,000 others injured in the two East African cities by the bomb blasts, which were blamed on Islamic terrorists linked to the dissident Saudi millionaire, Osama bin Laden.

"The de-registered organizations were recently involved in activities and matters that are not in the interest of state security," Etemesi said.

He added that Kenya's 984 NGOs would be investigated and if "found to indulge in matters not worth the safety and interest of the welfare of Kenyans", they would be de-registered.

"When NGOs begin to involve themselves in matters for which they are not registered, the board takes this as a serious matter," he was quoted as saying by Kenya's independent East African Standard newspaper yesterday.

Kenyan authorities suspect that materials used for the building of the bombs, each weighing at least 800 kilograms, were smuggled into East Africa disguised as relief aid with the help of some Islamic relief agencies.

The decision to de-register the agencies came barely a month after President Daniel arap Moi, at a public rally in the Kenyan capital of Nairobi, questioned the credibility of some organizations he said had come into the country under

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the guise of relief agencies, but were a threat to public security. He said his government would trim down the number of NGOs from 984 to a manageable size, leaving only recognized charities like the Red Cross and the U.N. Children's Fund (UNICEF) to operate in Kenya.

Addressing mourners at the bomb site a few days later, he said those behind the Aug. 7 bombing "could not have been Christians".

His widely publicized remarks drew criticism from Muslim leaders who claimed their religion was being wrongly associated with violence. "Islam like any other religion does not support the killing of innocent people for whatever reason," Sheikh Ahmad Khalif, head of the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims (SUPKEM), said.

He accused the government of deliberately excluding Muslims, who form about 10 percent of Kenya's 30 million population, from the prayer services held for the victims of the bomb blast. The services were conducted by Christian leaders.

Moses Mureithi of the Joint Kenya-Arab Chamber of Commerce and Industry, which promotes trade between Kenya and Arab countries, warned that the crackdown would harm Kenya's economy.

"The government ought to rethink its dealings with errant organizations, because it may discourage genuine Arabs from investing in this country," he said.

Some think the government is simply using the Aug. 7 bombing incident to crackdown on "maverick" civic groups. "NGO's have always stood up against the rampant corruption in government offices," said Muita of HARA.

Unconfirmed reports indicate that the government might introduce a tax as a way to control the NGOs. If that happens, "many NGOs will close down, because they will not be able to afford it. Already there is little flow of funds from the donors," she added.

Badru Mapesa of the Nairobi-based Islamic Foundation of Kenya, however, takes a different view. "The government knows what it is doing and there is nothing wrong in investigating NGO activities," he said. "Some NGOs claim that they bring a lot of benefit to the country but, if the benefits are less than what it costs to host them, then they should be done away with".

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